

A person is seen from behind, looking down a city street at night. The street is illuminated by a bright, warm light source in the distance, creating a strong lens flare and illuminating the scene with a golden glow. The buildings on either side are dark, with some lights visible. The overall mood is contemplative and hopeful.

A BIGGER VISION

HOW WE CAN

SATURATE THE EARTH

WITH DESTINY-CHANGING REALITY

BY REV IAIN HESKETH

OF THE GOSPEL

A BIGGER VISION OF THE GOSPEL

HOW WE CAN SATURATE
THE EARTH WITH DESTINY-
CHANGING REALITY

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HOW WE CAN SATURATE THE EARTH WITH DESTINY-CHANGING REALITY

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OUR VISION IS THE OUTWORKING OF WHAT GOD HAS ALREADY SAID, IN A PARTICULAR TIME, LOCATION AND PEOPLE.

INTRODUCTION

Visionaries see things before others see them. They see the possibilities of the future and are convinced that what they see is worth giving themselves fully to! People who lead change do so because they are gripped by an idea, a concept and hunch that things could be different, dare I even say better.

God is doing new things. Sure, each generation builds on the work of the generation before. Each generation has innovated upon the learnings of the previous generation; yet there are some things that seem to have an eternal sell-by date; they are just consistent throughout the course of human history because they relate to us and our interactions with the eternal God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The world over, people are searching for meaning and significance. This is expressed through a plethora of ways, but we all want to know that our life has meaning; that we have mattered to someone and contributed something of meaning in life.

As followers of Jesus, our worldview is shaped not by what we say is true, but by what God has revealed as true in the person of Jesus and His teaching.

Leaders who follow after Him must submit their vision for a preferred future to what the Creator has revealed. Our vision is the outworking of what God has already said, in a particular time, location

and people. Of course, this doesn't mean that we don't rely on the Spirit to lead us in mission now. Without the Spirit, mission is limp and lifeless. The heart of Pentecostalism, found in the book of Acts, is the unfolding of the mission Jesus started through Spirit-empowered apostles and congregations. As I read Acts and the letters of the apostles, I see a church unconfined by buildings and the things that we have placed an over-emphasis upon. I see a people whose whole lives had been turned upside down and were beginning to send shockwaves throughout the world, such was the understanding that to give allegiance to Jesus meant there was no room for any other master. It could be argued that many of the problems addressed in the letters contained in the New Testament were written to tackle issues of a false Gospel that resulted in idolatry.

It is my observation, sadly, that many church leaders are so preoccupied with the vision for full buildings that they have lost sight of a bigger vision we are called to. The subconscious driver behind this is the question: how can we get bigger and better services? How do I know? I once thought this way! Why do we really want more people in one place? What is the motivation behind such a goal?

We drift from the Gospel and the mandate of Jesus at our peril. The remainder of what I write will explore God's vision, the Gospel and implication for mission and how we might fulfil Jesus' mandate for His church.

WHAT IS GOD'S VISION FOR THE WORLD?

HIS VISION FOR THE WORLD STRETCHES FAR BEYOND THE CAPACITY FOR US TO CONCEIVE IT. GOD'S VISION FOR THE WORLD BREAKS THROUGH OUR SMALL-MINDED AND ILL-CONCEIVED DESIRES FOR FANCIER BUILDINGS, GREATER ATTENDANCE, GOOD PROGRAMMES, AND LIFE CENTRED AROUND THE UPKEEP OF A BUILDING AND A PAID CHURCH STAFF.

In order for us to grasp the scale of His vision, we'd do well to remind ourselves of His big story. So this is where we will go before I explain why I believe, what I'm calling, "Gospel Communities" are the vehicle that enable us to live out God's vision for His world.

The story of God, as revealed through the pages of the Bible, is framed in six movements; Creation; Rebellion; Israel; Jesus, the Christ; the Church; New Creation. This isn't the place to unpack these six movements fully but it is important to note that God's story doesn't start with rebellion and sin, but with a creation of all that is seen and unseen, the wonders that have been discovered by scientific breakthroughs and the things still to be discovered. God then called a man, Abram, and promised him a family that would bless the world.

All of these things point to the One who began it all. Yet people have chosen to worship created things and settled for something less than they were created for, just as the apostle Paul writes in his letter to the church in Rome (Romans 1:18-32).

At the heart of mission is the battle for worship. God's story is steeped in this truth; we see it from the garden of the creation narrative right up to the garden of recreation. God designed

us to be worshippers through serving him as stewards of the non-human creation (Genesis 1-2), we failed (Genesis 3) but Jesus the Faithful One didn't (1 Corinthians 15:3, Romans 5 & 8). He is the true human, as the King of all things (Romans 1:3-4; Colossians 1:15-20) and is the only one through whom humanity can find our true purpose. Redeemed humans reconciled to God - through a living and active faith in Jesus - are called to tell others who have not heard the good news that there is a better story. Life makes sense when lived in allegiance to Jesus and we find our place, purpose and plan in His story.

The basis of a church without walls finds its heart in the core message of the Gospel because it is the Gospel that motivates us and calls us to be a part of God's mission to the world. I believe the reason we have restricted and overemphasised what happens in the church building is because we fundamentally have misunderstood the Gospel. Bill Hull, in his book 'Conversion and Discipleship', outlines five distortions of the Gospel that have been prevalent in the West, and sadly exported to other parts of the world through the missionary endeavours of the Western Church.

Hull, and others like him, argue that you cannot be a disciple of Jesus without obedience to Jesus

as King. The 'Discipleship Gospel,' as Bill Hull has termed it, is centred on four core declarations that we find in the Gospel accounts and is the thread of the letters of the rest of the New Testament. The core message, and the imperatives of the Gospel, can be found in Mark 1:15-17; Mark 8:27-31; 1 Corinthians 15:3-4:

- **THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS NEAR OR AT HAND**
- **THE KING OF THE KINGDOM IS JESUS, THE CHRIST**
- **KING JESUS DIED FOR YOUR SIN**
- **KING JESUS ROSE AGAIN ON THE 3RD DAY**

This naturally leads us to the imperatives of the Gospel, which are correctly identified by Bill Hull as:

- 01. REPENT** - in light of the Gospel message we come to realise that we have been ruling our own kingdom, made ourselves king and therefore have been in opposition to the One True King. Through repentance we surrender our pithy kingdom of me, myself and I to the One who brings life and hope through the Gospel.
- 02. BELIEVE** - in light of the revelation of Jesus as the True King (John 1:44-51), we decide to put our trust in His rule, knowing that if Jesus died and rose again to make living in the kingdom of God possible, he really is a Good and Perfect King.
- 03. FOLLOW** - in light of the reality that Jesus is the True King, having submitted to His leadership through repentance and believed he is God because of His resurrection, we are to follow His ways if we are to be true citizens of the kingdom of God (1 John 2:6).

These are the core elements of the Gospel message rooted in the story of God's people. I believe that when God's people, the church made up of Jew and Gentile, grab hold of the Gospel within the context of God's redemptive plan for all of creation, it fills us with a vision bigger than we have previously believed. It moves us from a self-centred, individualistic, "Jesus died for me and I get to go to heaven" Gospel, to "Jesus died for me and calls me to follow him and participate with him in working to bring about the uniting of all things under His rule, just as it was in the beginning."

God's vision is for the uniting of all things under Christ through His death and resurrection (Ephesians 1:7-10; Colossians 1:19-22), and in doing this, He is making all things new (Isaiah 43:18-19; 65:17; John 3:1-21; Revelation 21:5). We create a small Gospel when we simply think in terms of filling buildings, sustaining ministries and running church programmes; we reduce the implication of the Gospel to a personal encounter and life improvement plan.

The implications of the Gospel are wide-ranging - one could say whole-life changing! The Gospel changes everything! A bigger vision of the Gospel paints Jesus as Lord over all things (Colossians 1:15-20) and the only one who is worthy of full allegiance. A response to the Gospel certainly involves the forgiveness of sin and right standing with God. However, if Jesus is King and He has a Kingdom, those of us who have been redeemed by Jesus are commissioned to live by the values

THIS VISION WAS BIG ENOUGH FOR JESUS TO DIE FOR...

of the King in all of life, not just some of life. God's people are to be a visible representation of the God we worship and serve (1 John 4:7-14). This means the focus of our energy as the church can't be for equipping God's people for service in the gathered church but to serve God beyond the gathered church.

Imagine the impact on society if, for instance, when a cleaner who is a Christian doesn't just see themselves as a cleaner but as a follower of Jesus who happened to be a cleaner. Through their work, they were creating a clean and tidy environment that is a reflection of God bringing order from chaos and creating a good place for work to be done well and people to flourish. This kind of mindset is the thinking of someone who has an understanding that whatever we do matters to God and our actions are a reflection of who and what we value.

Imagine if people were discipled properly and commissioned to be ambassadors of the kingdom in their everyday lives. There would be more and more stories of kingdom impact beyond the gathered church. Please, I'm not decrying the need for people to serve in the gathered church community in ministries to the body and outreach! However, it seems to me that a vastly disproportionate amount of finance, time and energy goes into getting people trained and equipped for a relatively small portion of time available to serve in the church. If there are 168 hours in the week, once we have taken away the hours spent doing everyday life, work, sleep, spending time with friends and family, realistically we only have between 5-10 hours available for gathered church activity!

This is not only a barrier to effective mission in the UK but this emphasis has been exported all over the world! The only way that the earth is going to be saturated with the Good News of Jesus is if all of God's people pick up the mandate to go into all the world, starting with where we are now. It strikes me, that a very real danger for missionaries and church leaders, is they end up giving more time to administration and fundraising that squeezes the time available to do the very thing they are called to do - discipling and releasing indigenous disciple-makers with a big vision of the Gospel. What would world mission look like if more attention was given to equipping people for ministry rather than simply doing ministry?

If we look to Jesus, who is our leader and king, we can see a pattern of how He did it.

Jesus was and is the greatest visionary missionary! When He submitted to the Father's will to come to the earth He created, He did so because of the vision to redeem all things from the grip of darkness. This vision was big enough for Him to die for, and His authority over all things meant that His death wasn't the end. He called a small group of inexperienced and unlikely people in order that He might bring them into the life He intended so they could then take this Good News to others. Jesus lived His life with a three-dimensional relational approach. As we see in the Gospels, He lived with a rhythm of deliberately spending time with His heavenly Father in prayer and solitude but also through His visits to the temple. He also shared His life with His disciples, giving particular attention to those known as the Twelve.

God's vision for the world is delivered through the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus and He makes it known through the redeemed people of God; that's you and me if we are followers of Jesus (1 Peter 2:1-10). He has chosen to do this through forming a people, who are His body on earth. It is the Church.



THE MISSIONARY TASK

So, a big vision of the Gospel needs a big vision for the Church. In the above paragraphs I've posed some questions about how we view the Gospel and how the global Church might break out of the confines we have placed upon ourselves. Is there any hope for a different way? The good news is, I think there is.

We see the Good News of Jesus being Good News to the whole person and every village, town and city on the earth in response to Jesus' commission to make disciples.

Will everyone respond to the good news? No. Will everyone like people who bring good news? No. Will we, as Elim, reach everyone with the good news? No. However, if we believe the good news we cannot stay silent, as David Bosch wrote about the call of Jesus in the Great Commission:

'...“Make Disciples.” If Jesus is indeed Lord of all, this reality just has to be proclaimed. Nobody who knows of this can remain silent about it. He or she can only do one thing - help others also to acknowledge Jesus' lordship.'

Mission is about the Holy Spirit creating a new humanity through people receiving the life-transforming message that Jesus is Lord of all, and that he came to liberate all people - in fact all creation - from captivity to sin and death (examples of this are John 3:16, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Romans 5-8, Galatians 5, Ephesians 2:1-10, Philippians 3). How then do we mobilise the whole Church to take the whole Gospel to the whole world?

If we are to be a Church that is not restricted by the unholy trinity of attendance, buildings and cash but to truly be a Church without walls, we must recapture the sent and sending nature of God. God is a missionary God, and he calls a missionary people to work with him in the stewardship of the earth under His ultimate authority.

CATALYST FOR MOVEMENTS OF GOSPEL COMMUNITIES IN EVERY NATION

Elim Missions seeks to be 'a catalyst for movements of Gospel Communities in every nation', so in the remainder of this article, I want to outline what a Gospel Community is and how I think we capitalise on the momentum that is already building. First, some caveats and a brief understanding of the story we find ourselves in:

- 01.** We recognise the Holy Spirit is ahead of us and is already at work in the nations.
- 02.** We are thankful for Christian-led NGOs that are actively working to make the lives of millions of people better through some amazing projects transforming water supply, education, agriculture, micro-financing and many more vital services that contribute to people thriving. Meeting the physical/practical needs of a community can provide a great access point to communicate the Good News of Jesus not only with action but also with words.
- 03.** We believe that everyone thrives when they focus on the one thing they are called to do; for the people of God that is disciple-making; for churches that is multiplying churches. Elim is a collective of congregations and movements at home and abroad.

Elim began when a band of evangelists full of the Holy Spirit and saturated with passion for God's Word had a vision to see the whole of Ireland won for Christ. Our DNA is Spirit-empowered, Gospel-saturated mission. We aren't humanitarian workers, we are Good News ambassadors who will do humanitarian work because our vision of the Gospel demands it. There cannot be a divorce of evangelism and seeking to serve the needs of the wider community in which God's people are placed. That said, if service to the last, lost and least is done without informing people why we do this, the Church simply becomes just another charity doing good. The one thing that marks us out as different is the Good News of Jesus' death and resurrection and the life-giving hope that is found in following after him!

In our history, Elim Missions had pioneers who crossed cultures to find that the Holy Spirit was already there, and as a result, joined Him in His mission. Elim started works in many places and is now under the leadership of leaders who have been developed through the growth of the Church. Over the years, more missionaries have gone to serve with our existing partners, but we have sent few pioneers to unreached nations or people groups. There are a few examples but it has not been an intentional part of our strategy. However, this is something that we are intentionally working towards rectifying.

We are concentrating our efforts on mobilising God's people through equipping them to be disciple-makers wherever they are placed, and for church leaders to identify, equip and release men and women to pioneer Gospel Communities in every nation.

Gospel communities are 'small (between 12-40 people), flexible and reproducible communities of people who are living as disciples of Jesus and intentionally making disciples; they seek to multiply by planting more communities through disciple-making.'

The subconscious question most church leaders ask is, how can I fill my building? The question we have to ask is how can we saturate our villages, towns, cities, nations with the Good News?

Before moving on to the seven principles I have identified for pioneering Gospel Communities, let's just clarify the values that hold the life and mission of Gospel Communities together:

Six Commitments of Gospel Communities:

SIX COMMITMENTS OF GOSPEL COMMUNITIES:

- TO BE ***SUBMITTED*** TO JESUS AS LORD OF ALL THINGS THROUGH OBEDIENCE AND WORSHIPPING HIM ONLY
- TO BE ***UNITED*** THROUGH COMMITMENT TO CHRIST'S CAUSE TO REDEEM ALL THINGS
- TO BE ***CONNECTED*** BY CONTAGIOUS RELATIONSHIP THAT CREATES HOLY CURIOSITY IN OTHERS
- TO BE ***FOCUSED*** ON DISCIPLE-MAKING THROUGH SIMPLE REPRODUCIBLE PATTERNS
- TO BE ***CENTRED*** ON MISSION AS THE ORGANISING PRINCIPLE FOR COMMUNITY LIFE
- TO BE ***SURRENDERED*** TO THE SPIRIT IN WILLINGNESS TO BE SENT AND TO SEND

How do you move toward being a church without walls? Here are seven things that I have observed from the life of Jesus and the apostle Paul, and things that are the practice of church planters today.

1. START SMALL; START WHERE YOU ARE

This almost sounds so simple, yet it is so easy to forget or miss. Visionaries see a picture of the future that others do not yet see. They see something in their mind's eye that is yet to be a reality and then set about creating the pathway to see that vision become a reality.

Pioneering new works in an unreached community with a people who have never heard of Jesus is going to take time. One of our missionary families working in South America spent several years going to the same community with what seemed like little fruit. Eventually people trusted them and many have come to trust Jesus as a result of their faithfulness in loving this community of people the way that Jesus loves them. From these small beginnings more people are being discipled in the way of Jesus and communities of faith are being formed.

This missionary family and others like them haven't sought to put up a building, gather a large crowd and export a Western approach to church, but started small - hidden even - much to the confusion of others who had a very different understanding of mission. I believe their approach to mission is the way Jesus would have done it if he were them.

Jesus worked with a small group, equipping them in the ordinary and the spectacular, and all the time he was teaching them how to disciple the nations. Jesus operated in three relational spheres while he was on earth: the three – see Matthew 17:1, Mark 5:37, 9:2, 14:33; the twelve – see Mark 3:14, 4:10, Luke 9:1, Matthew 26:20; the seventy-two – see Luke 10:1, 17. Post resurrection, Jesus appeared to 500 people (1 Corinthians 15:6). The network of disciples was growing!

We cannot fail to see in Acts 2 that several thousand people responded to Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost - which is a huge crowd - but the church didn't stay as a large crowd. Following the festival of Pentecost they went back to their own home cities, towns and villages. So how did Jesus' apprentices organise the fledgling church?

Acts 2:42-47 tells us that they met in homes and committed to four essential elements that laid the foundations of these 'Gospel Communities' to be used to change the world. Before we get to

those, it is important to say at this point in the development of the church they were still going to the temple but the gathering in homes prepared them for Acts 8:1, when the church was sown into the nations because of mounting persecution of Christians in Jerusalem. This was to bring about the promise of Acts 1:8, otherwise the church may well have stayed in relative comfort in Jerusalem without the missional provocation to go!

The four essential elements that they were devoted to were: the apostles teaching, commitment to community, eating together (including the Lord's supper) and prayer. It seems remarkably simple when you compare it to much of what we have become used to!

These house churches were under the direction and leadership of the apostles in Jerusalem, so they weren't unaccountable groups. They could not control the growth of the church, nor did it seem that they wanted to. The church was beyond the temple in ordinary homes and rooted in community. The changing lives of the fledgling church gave witness to the power of the resurrected and ascended Jesus.

These households operated like extended families, mainly because they would have been made up of family units. The families who had given allegiance to Jesus and committed to follow him lived life in such a radical way so that it created a holy curiosity in their communities. They saw people respond to Jesus as a result of living on mission in the everyday. For the early church, life and mission were not separated from discipleship, as to be a disciple was to be on mission with Jesus and for Jesus empowered by the Holy Spirit.

It is obvious that the size of the house would determine the size of the gathering but, the goal wasn't to fill buildings, build buildings or run loads of centralised programmes; the goal was to equip every believer to make disciples, and in so doing fill the earth with the Good News of Jesus and multiply 'Gospel Communities'. It was in this setting that leaders (elders) were trained to lead the church in mission. Elders were more like fathers leading a family than CEOs leading an organisation.

2. PROCLAIM AND TEACH THE KING AND THE KINGDOM

This seems obvious, but in a recent conversation with a small group of our missionaries, one of them reflected that many of the Christian INGOs were great at doing social projects but neglected to share the Gospel! Do villages in remote parts of Asia and Africa need fresh water?

Absolutely, they do! Should Christians be involved in such work? Without a shadow of a doubt! Do we do good works just to get the opportunity to preach the good news? No. We do good works because it is the right thing to do but done in the name of Jesus we should expect that an opportunity to share about Jesus and the Good news of His kingdom would come.

A former missionary told me a story of a village they visited located in a country in Asia. The team had identified a village that would have benefited from one of the community projects that they offered to villages. The leaders of this village were of another faith, and knew that the missionaries were Christians. The leaders of this village adamantly decided among themselves that they would not become Christians. However, the missionary team had determined that they would do this project if the leaders would allow them to, as it would be of great benefit to the community. Ordinarily, mission teams who go in to do humanitarian type work will do the job during the day and retreat from the project and people to a hotel for food and relaxation. This missionary team functioned differently, they worked hard during the day and they ate with the leaders of the village and had fun with them. They listened to their stories and shared life with them. As a result of the missionary team spending time with people, they were invited to share the Gospel with all the leaders committing their life to Christ and a church being planted.

We cannot expect the Kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven if we do not announce the arrival of the King and His kingdom!

What we learn from the apostles Peter and Paul as they did mission to their respective audiences - Peter largely to Jews and Paul to Gentiles - is that they started with where the people were in their understanding. Identifying the access point to the community, Peter in Acts 2 addressed a Jewish audience and rooted the proclamation of the Good News in their story. Paul in Acts 17, when addressing the crowd in the Areopagus in Athens, started with the unknown god they worshipped and used this to point them to Jesus. As Gospel workers, we are called to love everyone always and seek out access points to share the Good News of Jesus.

A bigger vision of the Gospel forces us to go beyond the walls of the church, not simply with community projects but with a message that has the power to change eternal destinies.

3. DO IT WITH OTHERS - LIFE IN COMMUNITY

(Acts 2:42-47; 16 & 17; 1 Thessalonians 2:8)

In the West, we live in highly individualised cultures. Everything is geared toward the individual's betterment, rights and consumption of more. This breeds an inherently selfish and isolated outlook on life, where our needs and wants supersede that of others.

In the global south, where western culture hasn't permeated into nations, cultures would be more reflective of what we see in the New Testament. The collective is more important than the individual; honour is highly valued and bringing shame on the community is to be avoided. It can sometimes lead to individual personality and expression of humanity being suppressed and conformity to the accepted norms adopted.

The story of God is that he is creating one new humanity from the nations of the earth, united under the Lordship of Jesus and living to His glory. I believe that the community of faith should be a visible expression of the life that is to come when people live with Jesus as their king. I think that is what we see in the idealised picture of the Church that Luke portrays in Acts 2:42. It seems they lived in such a way that created a holy curiosity in others that caused a missional impulse and their way of life became attractive to those who were outside this community.

It would seem that as Paul's missions strategy developed he was looking for a person of peace in a town that would be open to him, open to his message and open their network to him and his missionary companions. This is certainly the case with Lydia and in Thessalonica Paul shared his very life with them and not just his message! Paul knew the value of community not only for the continued strengthening of the Church but entwined with this for mission. In fact, Paul commends the Thessalonians for their faith that had gone out to Macedonia and Achaia (1 Thessalonians 1:8). Doing life with others is not an optional extra for the disciple of Jesus! When we come to faith in Jesus, He brings us into His family. In Acts, we get a glimpse of the depth of commitment to Jesus and each other, so much so that some were willing to sell their property in order to support others in the community. I'm not suggesting that we do that, as the early Church didn't continue this as a normative practice as it expanded. However, I do want to speak to the motivation of our hearts. Would we be willing to give what is important to us for the benefit of someone else?

People in our towns and cities won't be able to see the radical transformation of Jesus in our lives, and how this reality shapes our whole life, if we continue to prioritise getting people to church services. I reiterate, I am not against gathering as the church but the question I am wrestling to answer is; how to saturate the whole earth with the Gospel of Jesus?

The only way I can see us doing this is if every believer lives a life in full devotion to Jesus, in commitment to the community where they live and are open to inviting those who are curious to experience the community of faith. What would be the effect on the nations if there was a Gospel Community for every 500 to 1000 people?

We are designed for deep, authentic community, and if we neglect this we miss out on the life Jesus intended us to live.

4. DEVELOP OTHERS - BUILDING LEADERS

(Acts 14 & 16; 2 Timothy 2:2)

There is an African proverb which says, "if you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." If we learn anything from Jesus, the greatest leader that has ever walked the earth, we see that he spent a disproportionate amount of time investing in a small group of people. Jesus' example obviously rubbed off on His apprentices and those who followed because we see these leaders of the early church identify and release leaders for the churches that were being planted.

If we are to see movements of Gospel Communities unrestrained by the physical walls of a particular building, then leaders are going to have to spend a significant amount of time discipling and raising leaders for meaningfully leading communities of faith on mission.

The apostle Paul, when writing to his young protégé Timothy, challenged him to pass onto others what he had passed onto him; "What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, commit to faithful men who will be able to teach others also." (2 Tim 2:2)

Why was Paul able to cover the amount of ground he did in church planting? Because he took others with him and developed capable leaders. Paul wasn't threatened by other leaders' successes - in fact, it seems that he was often overjoyed when he knew that the communities of faith were thriving and the elders were leading well.

The same team of missionaries I mentioned above who are working in a country in Asia have taken this principle to heart and in, just over a decade, they have trained a couple of hundred leaders at least. After ten years of giving their attention to training leaders who carry the same heart and vision - to see one church and one trained leader in every village in the nation they work in - they have seen over 200 churches being planted and 'master trainers' being released to train others. This work is a fine example of what can happen when we intentionally build teams and develop leaders.

5. USE WHAT'S AVAILABLE

In the early days of the church as recorded in Acts, we see that the first believers gathered in the places that were available - whether in the Temple and Synagogues or in homes (Acts 2:46). Using these places that were naturally available led them to see evangelism and mission as an integrated part of following Jesus in all of life. Evangelism was also carried out in the public space, as seen in Peter's sermon in Acts 2 or Paul in Acts 17 and the personal space, as demonstrated in Acts 10, 14 and 16.

In my role as International Missions Director for Elim UK, I have the privilege of connecting with many leaders from across the world. It is interesting to me that the leaders who aren't so focused on the stuff that happens in church buildings are the ones that are training and releasing leaders to plant churches. There are works in Europe that are stuck because of a huge focus on the

perceived need for a permanent church building, whilst leaders in other places such as West Africa, South America and the Philippines are making disciples and releasing leaders because they are using what's available to them - namely peoples' homes or even gathering under trees or temporary structures. Now, in case you think I'm against us owning church buildings, I'm not; I just think that buildings make great servants but terrible masters!

So what am I saying? Don't make the lack of a church building an excuse for not progressing the mission of God right where you are. Leaders must build in high accountability with those they are releasing and not seek to overly control (it's not no control!) what these leaders do. Help them to innovate with what is available, so that people can be discipled and more people reached for Jesus.

6. CLARIFY WHAT IS IMPORTANT

(1 Thessalonians 1-2)

This seems pretty obvious, but how easy is it for us to just add more and more things to our lives and community activity? What is the one thing you are called to do, and are all the other things you do feeding into that?

The apostle Paul commended the community of faith in Thessalonica for the focus they had maintained in the things of primary importance - faith, hope and love. Paul had spent significant time establishing this church and gives us a window into his approach - he shared life with them, wasn't a burden to them financially, and gave himself to helping them grow in Christlikeness to the point that the news of the Thessalonians' faith had spread throughout the region.

You have to decide what it is that God has called you to do through prayer, experimentation and discernment by processing this with others. In the context of church however, I would agree that we are called to do the things that Jesus did and commissioned His apostles to do. What does this look like?

Leaders are required to cultivate environments where people can grow in devotion to God through being an example to the community of living a life of prayer and devotion to God's Word. There is also a need for people to develop deep authentic friendships where the many 'one another' statements of the New Testament can be expressed and we can help one another grow as disciples of Jesus. The natural outflow of this kind of life should be one that is attractive to those God is calling to himself, which leads us to live a life on mission to lead people far from God back to God. The churches I know who are living out the value of a church without walls are crystal clear on why they exist, what their goals are to measure success and are relentless in their focus.

7. HOLY SPIRIT LED, PRAYER-FUELLED EXPANSIVE VISION (AND DOESN'T CARE WHO GETS THE CREDIT!!)

Finally, there is absolutely no possibility of the Church being all that She has been purposed to be without an absolute reliance on the Spirit. Jesus commanded the apostles and the large circle of disciples to stay in Jerusalem until they had received the Holy Spirit, and only then would they have the power to take the Good News beyond the boundary of Jerusalem. If we truly want to plant churches that are unrestricted by the walls we can build to protect ourselves we will need to be a people who walk with the Spirit, pray continually and have an expansive vision of God's mission and purpose for His Church in the world.

A group of people are sitting around a wooden table in a kitchen, eating breakfast. The table is set with various dishes including scrambled eggs, toast, and fruit. There are also several glasses of orange juice and a carton of milk. The scene is lit with warm, natural light, suggesting a morning setting. The text 'I HOPE YOU HAVE BEEN PROVOKED TO IMAGINE A BIGGER VISION OF THE GOSPEL...' is overlaid on the image in a large, bold, black font with a white background.

I HOPE YOU HAVE BEEN PROVOKED TO IMAGINE A BIGGER VISION OF THE GOSPEL...

CONCLUSION

My aim has not been to provide a model for church growth but to identify principles from scripture, experience and learning from practitioners across the globe who are leading church planting movements. I hope you have been provoked to imagine a bigger vision of the Gospel, as you dream of what could be as we intentionally live in such a way as to saturate the earth with the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus, the Christ.

CHECK OUT THE APPENDICES THAT TAKE THINGS A LITTLE DEEPER...

APPENDIX

GOSPEL COMMUNITIES EXPLAINED

I want to explore the three values and six commitments of Gospel Communities that I have seen evidenced through the work of our missionaries and partners. What I offer you here is based on practices I have seen used by those who are planting churches that multiply and have seen used in Missional Communities in the UK. They may not use the terms I am using to cast vision for Gospel Communities, however, I find them a helpful way of describing what we could pursue in pioneering movements that saturate the world with the Good News of Jesus. Not only this, I am involved in the leadership of a local church that is transitioning to establish Gospel Communities in the Stratford on Avon district, UK.

I believe that if these values and commitments I describe below are expressed in and through Gospel Communities, they will not only develop an authentic community but we will be formed into the kind of people that God imagined in the beginning. Let me be clear, this is not about imposing a model for how a Gospel Community functions but about living as citizens of the kingdom of God with gospel intentionality expressed through these values and commitments.

Let's be honest, everything seems easy on paper but the reality is that leading pioneer mission is never as straightforward as it appears on paper! The values and phases you see detailed here are things I'd expect to see in the life of Gospel Communities on mission with Jesus. Think of these as a guide on a journey of adventure rather than a formula or rules to obey. We must create structures and systems of accountability that are strong enough to support the burgeoning life of new communities of faith but flexible enough to adapt to the needs of the context in which they operate.

DEVOTED TO GOD (UPWARD RELATIONSHIP)

Prayer is the foundation of our life with God. It is inconceivable to think of a disciple, let alone a missionary disciple-maker, whose life is not saturated in a life of prayer. When I think of our churches in parts of the world where danger and persecution are very real, their devotion to God in prayer is a value that permeates their lives and underpins their practice. In a Gospel Community, devotion to God is seen through whole life dependence on Christ and alignment to His purposes. When I hear stories of persecution from our brothers and sisters in West Africa, India or Pakistan (to name a few places), one cannot help but be inspired by their devotion to the Lord. You see, they have an unwavering commitment to be...

#1 Submitted to Jesus as Lord of all things expressed through obedience to His ways and worship as service to His purposes.

When devotion to God and His agenda takes preeminence and leaders cast vision for communities that are...

#2 United through commitment to Christ's cause to renew all things not just some things.

Unity with God means aligning with His purposes and to be a people united in that purpose is crucial to fruitful mission. Jesus is our centre and **prayer** is our fuel. Gospel Communities are

A BIGGER VISION OF THE GOSPEL

catalytic environments where people are encouraged and equipped to live in wholehearted devotion to God.

SHARED LIFE IN COMMUNITY (INWARD RELATIONSHIPS)

It's easy to look at the early days of the church in the book of Acts and idealise what we read. However, I think Acts reveals values that are foundational for the church throughout the ages. The growth of the church in Acts wasn't down to clever marketing strategies but because disciples lived in **obedience** to Jesus and were living a different story to the predominant culture. As we read Acts, we must ask, what are the guiding principles that cultivate a compelling alternative to the self-preservation we see in so much of our world? One of the principles for creating this kind of community is the practice of hospitality.

For much of our world, **hospitality** is an ingrained practice of the culture. What makes Gospel Communities practise of hospitality so different? They open their lives, homes and table just like the apostle Matthew in Mark 2:13-17. The churches I see growing with new life are those that choose to live for the good of others both in the Gospel Community and beyond, expressed through everyday hospitality. This way of living cultivates life-giving communities that bear witness to Jesus. For instance, in the Philippines Gospel Communities are...

#3 Connected by contagious relationships that creates holy curiosity in others.

They are relentlessly...

#4 Focused on disciple making through simple reproducible patterns so that people far from God might come to experience His grace.

Gospel Communities are catalytic environments where disciples spur one another on in faith and good works. Through Gospel Communities, not-yet-followers of Jesus should see the evidence of faith in Jesus lived out through loving inter-generational and socially diverse spiritual families.

WITNESS TO JESUS (OUTWARD RELATIONSHIPS)

Finally, what we see in Scripture and Gospel Communities the world over, is that where there is clarity about why the church exists, they see people come to faith in Jesus. In Matthew 28:18-20 and Acts 1:8 Jesus commissions the Apostles and, by implication, all those who follow Him. He commissioned them (and us) to be witnesses to His resurrection. The gospel of Jesus is Good News to the whole person and indeed for the whole world. In Jesus, we see him demonstrating incredible compassion and boldly inviting people to follow Him. Without participation in the mission of God, the church ceases to be the church. The more we mature as a community of Jesus followers, the more desiring we become about mission as Good News to the whole person and not just their soul!

If our witness doesn't allow the Good News to be **proclaimed** then we are simply doing good works.

If our witness doesn't show compassion for the poor, the hurting and the lost, then we are nothing more than a noise.

However, when our collective witness is to the transformative power of the gospel expressed through our sacrificial love for others (friends and foes), it sends a powerful message to a selfie-obsessed world of a radically new way to live. How do Gospel Communities do it? You'll find they are:

#5 Centered on mission as the organising principle for community life; and

#6 Surrendered to the Spirit in willingness to be sent wherever the Spirit leads, and to send whomever God calls to bear witness to Jesus and make disciples.

A BIGGER VISION OF THE GOSPEL

Ultimately, the heartbeat of Gospel Communities is that collectively we bring our gifts to help one another follow Jesus faithfully and be a witness in the world to the glory of God. God is glorified when we live in obedience to His ways and when sinners find their way home to the Father, who tenderly restores them to a relationship with Himself. It is to be on an adventure of mission together.

PHASES OF DEVELOPING GCs (Mark 4, Acts 2:42-47, 1 Thessalonians 2)

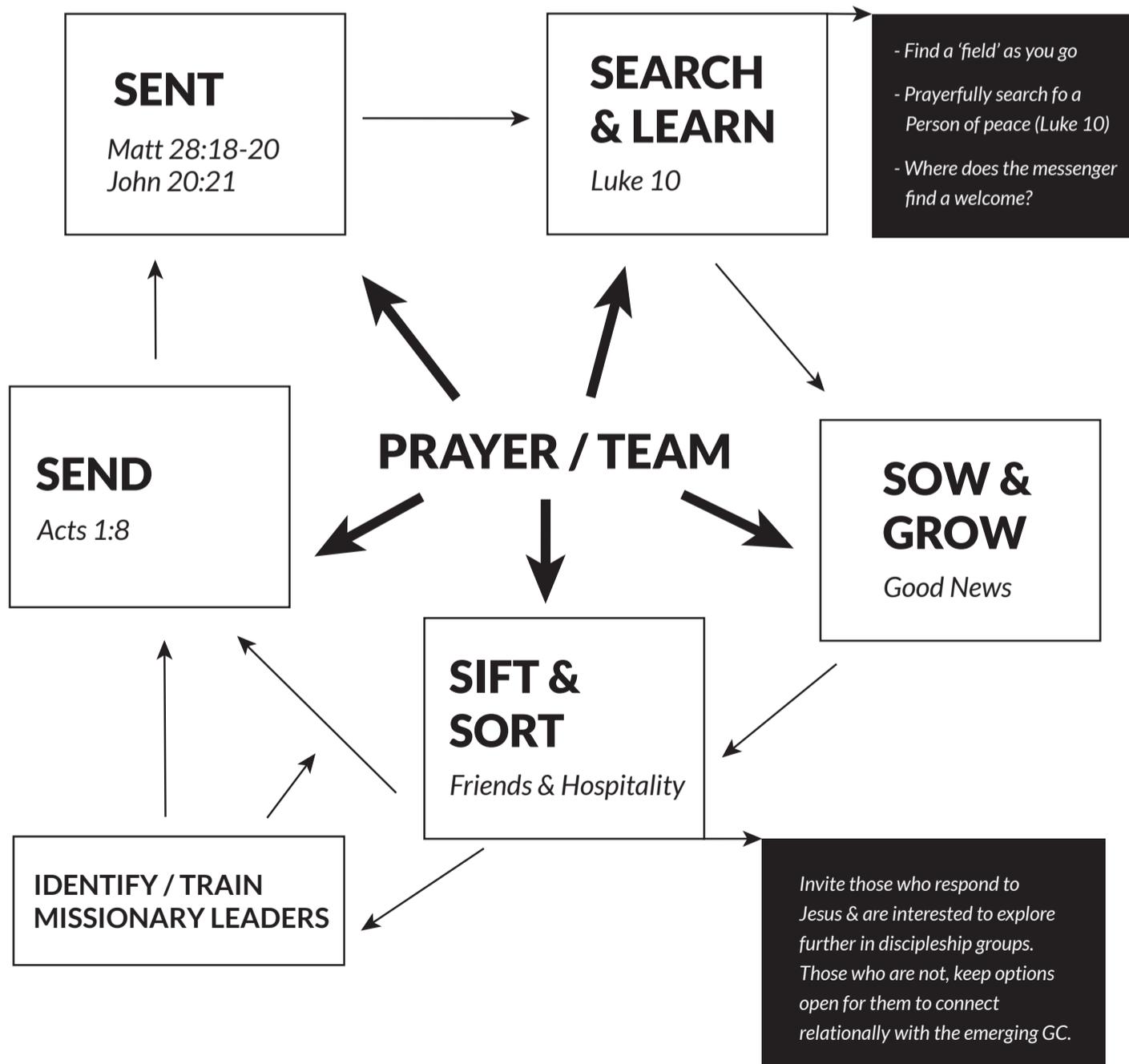
A Missionary team moving into a new field will seek to live out the values of prayer, hospitality, and mission in each of these phases. (Neat on paper, but in reality, it is far messier!!)

All followers of Jesus are SENT. The question we must ask is, to whom and to where are we sent. The majority of disciples will stay in the nation they are born in and will do mission in the place they live. However, God is still calling people to leave the familiarity of their home nation to join with Him in taking the Good News of Jesus to people who have not heard it.

The question you may be asking is, when can it be called a gospel community?

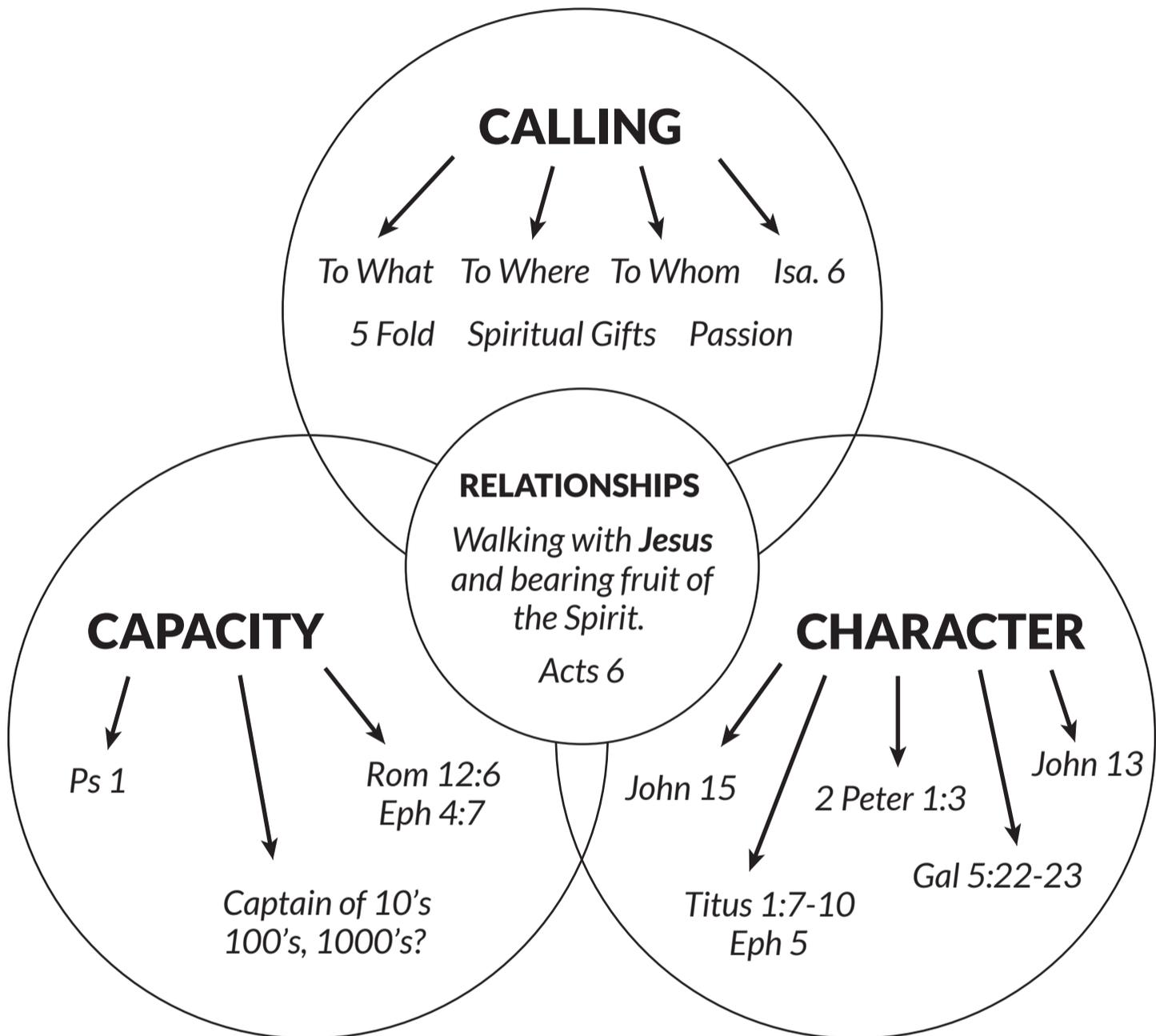
Key ingredients that identify when a group becomes a Gospel Community are when they **pray, worship, share life together, share meals** including the **Lord's Supper**, gather to **learn** and **live out the Word of God, give**, and are **actively engaged in evangelism**. These do not just happen; they take leadership and intentional action.

The diagram below seeks to guide you through the phases of seeking to establish a gospel community.



WHAT ARE WE LOOKING FOR IN GC LEADERS?

Leaders are developed over time. Sure, some people are naturally gifted leaders, but people can develop skills that enable them to lead others as long as they have the character necessary to lead people spiritually. Mike Breen, author of **Building a Discipling Culture**, describes leadership development simply as advanced discipleship. This diagram outlines what we are looking for in Gospel Community leaders:



<p>HOW DO YOU DEVELOP LEADERS?</p> <hr/> <p><i>Let them lead...</i></p> <hr/> <p>APPRENTICE - Leadership Square</p> <p>ACCOUNTABILITY - Direction / Discussion</p> <p>ACTION - Do it</p>	<p>LEADERSHIP PATHWAYS</p> <hr/> <p>INFORMATION - What do they need?</p> <p>FORMATION - Who are they becoming?</p> <p>APPLICATION - Do they do it?</p> <p>INNOVATION - You have a go...</p>
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Additional qualities to consider and look out for in those you are discipling:

Calling - what do they talk & think about most (evidenced in action)

- Leader / influencer for good
- Gatherer
- Desires (in a good way) to shepherd people
- Mission focused
- Enabler of others

Character - qualification for elders

- Humble
- Love for people evidenced
- Good reputation in wider community
- Learner
- Kind
- Accountable
- Keeps their word
- Trustworthy
- Even tempered
- Faithful
- Other focused

Capacity -

- Manages time well
- Team builder
- Equipper
- Visionary
- Teach God's Word and apply it
- Disciple maker

RECOMMENDED READING & BOOKS THAT HAVE SHAPED MY THINKING:

Mike Breen, Building a Discipleship Culture, 3dm International, Pawleys Island, 2016.
David Bosch, Transforming Mission, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York 10545, 2019.
Bill Hull, Conversion and Discipleship, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2016.

A BIGGER VISION OF THE GOSPEL

HOW WE CAN SATURATE THE EARTH WITH DESTINY-CHANGING REALITY

This book's intended purpose is to capture the beginning of an emerging vision for Elim Missions. I have sought to put on paper what I have carried in my heart for years! I have purposely tried to steer clear of presenting a model; and instead have focused on principles and practices of Gospel Communities. The context itself will determine the best model for working out the three values of devotion to God, shared life in community and witness to Jesus through Gospel Communities. I hope you are inspired to live a full life for Jesus and are determined to help others live likewise in order that the earth may be saturated with the glory of God.

Iain Hesketh, Elim International Missions Director

As a missionary who has had the privilege to serve Elim Missions in various contexts around the world, I am excited to read the vision for Elim International Missions as unpacked by Rev Iain Hesketh in this book. These pages have helped me articulate what the Holy Spirit has deposited in my heart for years. 'The Bigger Vision of the Gospel' will be used as a catalyst and tool to help me raise and develop disciple-makers wherever I find myself.

Mark King, Missions Director, Ealing Christian Centre

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